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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000933

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER  
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA  
PARIS FOR DNOBLES

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI SEES NO END IN SIGHT TO POLITICAL  
DEADLOCK

REF: BEIRUT 921

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri described Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun as a "disaster" and insisted that he had told the FPM leader several times he would not acquiesce to reappointing Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil as Minister of Telecommunications. Hariri admitted he had been badly stung by Walid Jumblatt's recent statements and complained that the Druze leader should have reaffirmed his commitment to the March 14 Coalition by issuing a statement after Aoun's press conference. Hariri placed culpability for the current deadlock firmly at the feet of Hizballah and the Syrians. While Hariri continued to see a role for President Michel Sleiman as arbiter in the government formation process, he underscored his joint efforts with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea to convince Sleiman to redouble his efforts to free the political logjam. Berri in a separate meeting dismissed the possibility of calling for the parliamentary commission to meet to discuss electing the parliamentary committees, contrary to his statements last week that he would do so even if the new cabinet had not been formed.

2. (C) Although many had predicted a protracted bargaining period, there does not appear to be a sense of urgency in forming a functioning cabinet given the continuing distrust between March 14 and the opposition. March 14 caretaker Finance Minister told us August 18 that "it could be worse; this is some sort of equilibrium," while caretaker PM Siniora commended Hariri's patient approach and recommended he stay the course without conceding to Aoun's demands. End summary and comment.

HARIRI: AOUN IS A "DISASTER"

3. (C) During an August 18 meeting with Ambassador and PolOff, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri described Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun as a "disaster"

and insisted that he had told the FPM leader several times he would not acquiesce to reappointing Aoun's son-in-law and go-to man Gebran Bassil as Minister of Telecommunications. "It's ridiculous to make Gebran Bassil a minister. I'd rather go home and not form a government," Saad declared. (Note: Bassil lost his race for a parliamentary seat in the June 7 elections. Both President Michel Sleiman and Hariri oppose appointing failed parliamentary candidates as ministers. End note.) A spent and somewhat muted Hariri dismissed the possibility of a compromise with Aoun based on granting Bassil a different ministry and disparaged Aoun's decision to use a fiery televised press conference to reject Hariri's invitation to meet to discuss government formation. "You can ask for whatever you want as long as it is not in the media. If you put it in the media, that's it. You've drawn a red line."

¶4. (C) Commending Hariri's measured statement in response to Aoun's invectives the day before, the Ambassador noted that Hariri had calmly reiterated that the task of Cabinet formation was the responsibility of the Prime Minister-designate in cooperation with the President. Hariri's statement had also underscored his constitutional role as Prime Minister-designate in forming the next government instead of descending into the mire of political insults. Hariri emphasized his position as leader of Lebanon's Sunni community. "Sooner or later they have to deal with me."

STUNG BY JUMBLATT'S BETRAYAL,  
HARIRI PINS HOPES ON SLEIMAN, GEAGEA

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¶5. (C) Hariri admitted he had been badly stung by the Druze leader's recent statements and complained that Jumblatt should have reaffirmed his commitment to the March 14 Coalition by issuing a statement after Aoun's press conference to reiterate his support for and inclusion in the 15-5-10 cabinet formula. Hariri seemed unconvinced, though, by Jumblatt's declaration that he was still with March 14. "I think Jumblatt is somewhere else now, unfortunately," he mused.

¶6. (C) Hariri absolved National Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri of culpability in the current crisis, instead placing the blame firmly at the feet of Hizballah and the Syrians. Hariri said it was obvious that Syria was using Jumblatt's defection from the March 14 coalition to its advantage and had been reaching out to Lebanese leaders across the political spectrum, including his March 14 ally Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel (reftel). Hariri asked that the USG continue to underscore to Syria its support for Lebanese sovereignty.

¶7. (C) "I think Iran has a blocking minority in Syrian decisions vis-a-vis Lebanon," he added. Hariri expected the opposition to insist on mentioning the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) in the next ministerial statement. "Everything that is happening is because of the Tribunal," Hariri opined, referring to the likelihood that Hizballah will seek to protect itself from allegations of involvement in Rafiq Hariri's assassination.

¶8. (C) Hariri continued to see a key role for President Michel Sleiman as arbiter in the government formation process, and said he and Lebanese Forces leader and March 14 ally Samir Geagea were urging Sleiman to redouble his efforts to free the political logjam. Hariri praised Sleiman's support throughout the government formation process and noted the President was planning to meet with Hizballah this week in an effort to move the process forward. He also expected the Saudis to push to further the process even during Ramadan. Hariri remained confident of his ties with Geagea, describing their alliance as "solid."

BERRI HALTS MOVEMENT ON COMMITTEES  
UNTIL GOVERNMENT FORMS  
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¶9. (C) During a separate meeting with the Ambassador and PolOff the same day, National Assembly Speaker and Amal party head Nabih Berri dismissed the possibility of calling for the parliamentary commission to meet to discuss electing the parliamentary committees, contrary to his statements last week that he would do so even if the new cabinet had not been formed. Berri admitted he wanted to move forward with the commission, but he was wary of destabilizing the cabinet formation process. However, he was confident that once the Cabinet had been formed, the committees could be assembled in as little as a day. (Note: Hariri told us that Berri canceled his initiative on Hariri's demand. End note.)

¶10. (C) Berri said he had only been to the South two times since the election because he was waiting for the government to be formed, and he joked about his recent silence on the current political deadlock: "Like Walid Jumblatt, I am fasting!" Berri was quick to point out that caretaker Prime Minister Fouad Siniora required 52 days to form the last government. He insisted that the process must be completed by the end of the month, and he underscored his support for Hariri.

¶11. (C) Berri claimed he was as baffled as the rest of Lebanon's political elite by Aoun's antics and admitted he was surprised the 15-5-10 formula -- his own creation, he asserted -- continued to meet resistance from Aoun. He also maintained he had been pushing Hariri to form a government quickly, although he believed the next government would

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differ little from the previous one. Amal and Hizballah had no hand in the delay, he claimed. "It's between Saad Hariri and Michel Aoun," Berri alleged, arguing that it had been a mistake to open the door to identifying ministerial candidates before the portfolios had been distributed. Berri admitted that his hands-off approach to government formation during the past month was deliberate. "I'm not a man with the confidence to have a dialogue with Michel Aoun. I know my limits."

¶12. (C) Berri agreed the Lebanese economy was booming due to an exceptional tourist season but "no thanks to the government." Although he believed the Kfar Shouba flare-up was a one-off incident, Berri highlighted Lebanon's enduring need for security.

A NEW EQUILIBRIUM?  
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¶13. (C) Most doubt that Saad Hariri will be able to form a functioning cabinet in the near future. During an August 18 luncheon hosted by March 14 MP Boutros Harb, guests spoke of the system having reached an "equilibrium." "It could be worse," commented caretaker Finance Minister Mohamed Chatah. Syria's choice would be inaction rather than any compromise in promoting its preferred cabinet candidates, he predicted. Although some believe the PM-designate has painted himself into a corner by refusing to allow Aoun to place Bassil in the cabinet, caretaker PM Siniora recommended that Saad "remain where he is," continue to take the higher ground, and avoid provoking Aoun or being dragged down to Aoun's level of debate. However, Siniora also warned of "radicalization" of March 14 Christians in response to Aoun's diatribe, and said he had urged Saad to pay particular attention to any concerns raised by Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. Siniora and March 14 SecGen Fares Soueid also noted their efforts to remain in contact with Walid Jumblatt, so as not to push him further away.

Comment  
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¶14. (C) Politicians from all sides persist in reiterating their support for Saad Hariri as PM-designate, and aside from Aoun, most continue to deem the 15-5-10 formula feasible. But no one has yet sketched a credible path from here to there. As long as there is no threat of violence for political gain in forming a government, most Lebanese expect the slow road to government formation continue. However, there is little sense of urgency evident as the summer goes on. End comment.

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